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## Semantic Relations of the Adjective *Empty* in Modern English Language

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### Abstract

The Linguistic picture of the world of different people is formed with a kind of network of coordinates that allows orientating better in the surrounding reality. The conception of emptiness or fullness of the space is also a part of this network. In English, the meaning ‘empty’ is usually expressed with the adjective *empty*, the importance of which for English culture is evidenced by its branched semantic connections. In this article, we attempt to trace these connections, to determine the peculiarities of the meaning and the use of the adjective *empty* and its numerous synonyms and antonyms.

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### 1. Introduction

Emptiness or fullness of the space is one of its important properties. The opposition “empty space – filled space” is the basis of human understanding of the world, on a par with such opposition as *good – evil*, *light – darkness*, etc. Reflecting of the worldview of various people we cannot do without these ancient, culturally important categories. “These universal concepts in every culture are linked, forming a kind of world model – “the network of coordinates”, through which people perceive reality and build the image of the world that exists in their minds ...” (Gurevich, 1972). On the other hand, the Italian humanist Lorenzo Valla thought “emptiness of the soul” – “*animi vacuitas*” to be one of the conditions of learning and wisdom (Krasilnikova, 2012). That is why the word meaning

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‘emptiness’, ‘empty’ and their derivatives present an important fragment of various pictures of the world including the English one. In English the root *empt-* and adjective *empty* is a usual expression for this meaning. The word *empty* has a big number of synonyms. Considering syntagmatic relations of the word *empty* we get a more exact reflection of people conceptions.

## 2. Semantic structure of the word *empty* in modern English language

In Webster's dictionary, this adjective has the following meanings: having nothing or no one in it; unoccupied; worthless; insincere (Webster, 1989). According to the Concise dictionary of the English language, the semantic structure of the adjective *empty* is the following: 1) having nothing within'; 2) unoccupied, unfurnished, without effect, unsatisfactory wanting substance'; 3) meaningless'; 4) 'empty-headed'; 5) 'hungry' (coll.) (Concise English dictionary, 2017). Therefore, the adjective has a nominative spatial and secondary estimating meaning and is semantically close with the Russian adjective *пустой* (Sosnina, 2010). In both languages, there is also a connection between adjectives *empty* and words *hunger*, *poor food* (comp. Russian expression *пустой сын* or dialect. *пустой год*, i.e. hunger year). Lexicographic sources of the English language do not reflect the substantive meaning of the word *empty*, which Russian equivalent *пустой* has: 'case, the circumstances of words, not worthy of attention'; and predicative meaning 'nothing, do not pay attention', marked for Russian language (Dictionary of the Russian language, 1987).

There are nouns derived from *empty* – pl. *empties* (this word is often used in technical texts), *emptiness*, *emptier* and adjectives *empty-handed* 'bringing or taking away nothing or no gift' (Webster, 1993). The dictionary does not give any other derivatives. The data of dictionaries indicate that the Russian word-building class is much more extensive than the English one. A large number of words which have the same root in Russian, as *пустой*, are distributed by different word-building classes in English, e.g. *пустынный* – Eng. *desert*, *desolate*, *bleak*, *inhibited*; *пускай* – Eng. *let*, *may*, *even*, *though*; *пускать* – *go*, *start*, *set out/ off*, *begin*, and so on (New English-Russian dictionary, 2010). The word *empty* is also a verb with meanings 'to make empty, deprive of content, remove from the vessel', 'empty', 'to release, to set free, to shoot' (Concise English dictionary, 2007). Therefore, the semantic transition "empty (adj.) > to shoot" is typologically similar in Russian and in English, cf.: Rus. *пустой* and verbs with the same root *пускать* 'to let go, to release' (including a projectile, bullet, etc.), and, on the other hand, nouns *пуск*, *запуск* 'start, run' or expression *спусковой крючок* 'trigger'. However, in the Russian language the relationship between the words *пустой* and *пускать* need proving: although etymologists assume that both words go back to one root *пуст-*, the semantic connection between them at the present stage of development of the Russian language is not evident. We also have to give a special explanation for the transition *пускать* 'to let go' > *пускать* 'to shoot' (Sosnina, 2014). For the English language such a problem does not exist, so as all three meanings 'empty', 'to release' and 'to shoot' are expressed by the same root *empt* – and the semantic relationships between them are quite transparent. The Russian-English dictionary also translates word *empty* as 'hollow', 'tenantless', 'uninhabited', and 'idle', 'shallow', 'futile', 'frivolous' (fig.) and 'vain, ungrounded' (New English-Russian and Russian-English dictionary, 2004).

In the dialects of British English in the beginning of XX century, there were few phonetic variants of the word *empty*: *ent*, *empt* (Stafford, Northampton, Oxford. Warwick and others), *emp* (Gloucester, Worcester, and others). However, regardless of form, all these words have the same meaning – 'to pour, to pour out, empty', cf. e.g.: *as quick as thought, they empt the well* – "they immediately emptied the well" (1826); *Wilee plaise to go out in back ouze and emp all the dirty water yū can vind* (it is author' spelling – A.C.) *in the tubs and buckets*. (Devon). We can also use these words with the prefix *un-*, (*on-*): *onempt this load of hay* (Wright, 1900). The adjective *empty* (*empy*) had the following specific meanings in English dialects: 'grass, the reed-like canary grass' (Cheshire, Oxford); used when cut into length of a 2.5 or 3 inches for quills to wind linen yarn upon for weavers; *emptyrods* – 'dried stalks of reed, cane' (ibid). Thus, a brief analysis of the word *empty* and its dialects in the English language does not provide with fundamentally new information about its semantics. The use of the adjective *empty* in relation to the segments of yarn, is connected, perhaps, with some special features of these segments. However, the naming of herbs growing in the wilderness with the word of the same root as the concept of empty space seems to be well motivated. The same situation we can observe in Russian, comp. *пустой* (empty) – *пустырь* (waste ground) – *пустырник* (motherwort).

### 3. Paradigmatic relation of the adjective empty in English

Lexicographic sources give the following synonyms for the adjective *empty*: *vacant*, *void*, *vacuous*, *blank*. For all five adjectives, dictionaries provide the following general definition: 'lacking the contents that could be or should be present'. We suppose that it is an important nuance in the meaning of the adjective, because it proves a subjective, anthropocentric perception of emptiness. Differences between all synonyms are described as follows: *empty* means 'having nothing within; vacant – 'without occupant, incumbent, tenant, inmate without inhabitant, officers' etc. (Webster's new dictionary of synonyms, 1984). Therefore, the word *vacant* 'unoccupied, free' could be applied to a place (or position) that is not occupied only by men. Therefore, the English word *vacant* is slightly different from its Russian equivalent *вакантный*, used only in relation to a position, but not in the context like *вакантная квартира* etc. Words *empty* and *vacant* express different ideas: we can say "an empty house"; it is a house containing nothing – neither tenants nor furniture. In the same time a *vacant house* – in Russian, we also translate this expression, as *пустой дом*, "an empty house", is a house without tenants, possibly intended for rent or sale. While an *empty chair* is a chair, where no one sits, a *vacant chair* is a chair that has lost its normal host because of death or other similar case (New English-Russian dictionary, 2010).

The following synonym, *blank*, is usually applied to a surface, on which nothing is written or there is some free space that can be filled. An absolutely empty object is often named *void*, e.g. "*Ms. sandy wilderness, all black and void*" (Shelley). The adjective *vacuous*, in turn, refers to the emptiness of the vacuum, cf. *vacuous globe of an incandescent lamp* (ibid). All five adjectives – *empty*, *vacant*, *void*, *vacuous*, and *blank* can be used in a figurative sense. Cf.: an *empty mind* means 'destitute of worthwhile ideas or knowledge'. A *vacant mind* is a mind 'lacking of soul or intellect'. The English-Russian dictionary informs that *vacancy*, the word derived from *vacant*, means 'absent-mindedness, indifference, dullness'. All these meanings are not reflected in English sources. A blank look is a look 'without expression'; person void of learning, of common sense is somebody who has not 'the slightest evidence of either one could be detected'; vacuous mind (look, expression) 'deficient in alertness or spirit' (ibid).

The Concise English Dictionary gives the same words – *vacant*, *void*, and *unoccupied* as synonyms to *empty*. These three words are mutually served to describe meanings of each other in the dictionary. Therefore, the word *vacant* means 'empty, unoccupied; of or at leisure, thoughtless'. For the word *void* dictionary gives the following lexicographic description: 'containing nothing, empty, deserted; unoccupied, unutilized; having no holder, vacant; not binding in law, is null, invalid (Concise English dictionary, 2011). Another similar word in meaning is *blank* 'pure, empty'; another synonym for the adjective *empty* is a word *inane* – 'empty, void, vacuous, senseless, characterless'. Nouns derived from it develop the same semantic lines: *inanition* 'fatigue, exhaustion from hunger', *inanity* – 'senselessness, mental vacuity emptiness an insipid empty-headed utterance' is meaningless, mental emptiness, meaningless statement. Dictionaries seldom give this word as a synonym for *empty*. However, the words entering the Russian word-building class with a root *empt* also develop a similar meaning: *пустота души*; *после всех переживаний он чувствовал себя опустошенным*.

In addition, the words *spare* (cf.: *do you have any spare boxes?*) and *clear* 'pure, free, unoccupied, unlocked, empty' have some distinct semantic intersection with *empty*. In the Russian language there is also a semantic correlation between *пустой* 'empty' and *пустой* 'clear', cf. *пустой лист* – *чистый лист*. In English, we have the same situation: *empty road* – *clear road* (i.e. free).

According to the lexicographic sources, the adjective *empty* differs from its synonyms on the following signs: 1. The nature of the object, i.e. what can be filled (plane, volume, etc.). 2. The nature of the subject, i.e., something that can fill the object (people, buildings, things, signs and. etc.). 3. Measure of expectations filling. 4. Speaker's Assessment of the fact that something is filled (Devlin, 2002; New big English-Russian dictionary, 1993-1994).

Among all these adjectives, the word *empty* has the widest use, as it can describe any plane, the capacity or volume. A speaker, using this word does not expect an object to be filled. In addition, *empty* can mean 'temporarily abandoned by people': *The house was empty when the fire broke out in. After his departure, the house seemed to her empty. The streets were empty of automobiles*. The word *vacant* may also refer to a plane or volume, but mainly intended for people or objects that serve them (buildings, etc.). Nobody expects them to remain empty for a long time, cf. *there were a few vacant seats in the carriage* (i.e. they can be occupied at any time); a *vacant apartment* is a free apartment etc. We can use the words *void* and *empty*, speaking about a plane or a volume filled

by any subject. The word does not reflect expectations of a quick filling; cf. *a void space, a void interval*. However, in contrast to the word *empty*, *void* can express a negative assessment by a speaker of the fact that something stays empty, especially if we are talking about the absence of living beings. Then emptiness can cause a speaker to feel sadness or loneliness. The only exception is an expression *a void of something* that does not have a negative emotional connotation: *the hotel ... would certainly be void of clients*. Adjective *blank* usually refers to flat surfaces (*a blank map, blank spaces to be filled in the gaps, blank check/ ballot blank*). Rarely can we use it speaking about a building at a specific location: *blank spaces* in the suburb and even less often speaking about the people. Examples for this case are not given in the dictionary. The last of a number of synonymic adjectives, *vacuous*, is used most often in relation to the volume, “a closed hollow empty space (vacuum), the filling of which is impossible or undesirable: *vacuous space*”: *the vacuous globe of the incandescent lamp*. All the words of the described synonymic series can be combined with nouns denoting space (*an empty space; a vacant space: it is a large town, but contains many void places/ vacant places within; he was staring down into the blank spaces between the two blocks of flats* (New English-Russian dictionary, 1993-1994).

All words we have described, except *vacuous*, can also be used in combination with nouns denoting “should be used by the public (streets, squares, parks, land)”. We can use three words of the list – *empty*, *vacant* and *void* in combination with the nouns designating premises: *an empty (a vacant) room, a hotel void of client*. The words *empty* and *vacant*, unlike the three other main synonyms, can be combined with nouns naming specific items: *an empty bed; a vacant chair*. We have mentioned that the adjective *empty* is the most free in its compatibility within a given number of synonymous and it may refer to vessels (jars, kegs, etc.) or large vehicles as *an empty ship (train), an empty cup* etc. Both in Russian and in English we can use all the synonyms meaning ‘empty’ not only in the literal spatial sense, but in a figurative or estimating: ‘devoid of significant spiritual values or temporarily lost the ability to deeply and seriously to think or worry; empty, thoughtless, superficial, lightweight, devastated’. The difference between synonyms is in the time of the manifestation of a sign named by an adjective and the degree of manifestation of this sign. All synonyms can designate a permanent or a temporary property of an individual. In contexts with the figurative meaning, the adjective *empty* has again the most common meaning: *an empty mind, an empty head, and empty, stupid people*. The word does not necessarily have a negative assessment. The next degree of the sign manifestation has the word *vacant*. It is more neutral than *blank*; the word *vacuous* indicates extreme spiritual poverty and negative evaluation: *a vacuous individual* ‘empty/ hollow man’, *an idle and vacuous young fellow* (ibid). Generally, both in English and in Russian there exists a typologically standard transition of words ‘empty’ > ‘useless’. According to M. Makovsky, semantics of old-Eng. *idle* ‘useless blank’ > *idle* ‘useless, lazy, empty’ indicates the possibility of emergence of light from the ominous void; it can be correlated with the Hittite *idalus* ‘bad, evil’ (Makovsky, 2000).

M. Fomina in her thesis “Conceptualization of “empty” in the linguistic picture of the world” describes two synonyms for *empty*: *free* and *unoccupied*. The word *unoccupied* is new for us in the list of synonyms. All synonymous adjectives – *empty* – *vacant* – *blank* – *unoccupied* – *spare* – *void* – *free* in monolingual dictionaries explain one another. The author calls this phenomenon “logical circle”, i.e. the words are interpreted through each other, for example, *empty* is defined as “void of the usual or appropriate contents; vacant, unoccupied” etc. (Fomina, 2009). Logical circles prevent the adequate reflection of the semantic nuances of these synonyms in lexicographic sources. To solve this problem, the author attempts to develop a special technique of adequate semantic description of synonyms and verification of this description. The author distinguishes special differential signs for each word in the list. One of these signs is a type of space (physical two - or three-dimensional, the mental, the psychic space-time spaces). If we talk about a three-dimensional space of relatively small volume (a cup, a vessel, etc.). In most cases, we make a choice in favor of the word *empty*. A large volume means the word *void*. The researcher observes an additional emotive component of ‘sadness, hopelessness’ for it. That prevents from the use of the adjective *void* in neutral contexts. Cf.: *Your glass is empty* – can I fill it up? And, on the other hand: *let her come in... and they two inherited the big, pale, void place* (the church). When they speak about flat two-dimensional surfaces, as it is reflected in the dictionary of synonyms, they often use the word *blank*. We perceive abstract entities as time, life, the inner world of man, as “containers”, a kind of a space. (Fomina, 2009; Lacoff & Johnson, 1980). Another specific sign for choosing one of the synonyms is expectation of filling a mental space, characterized by an adjective. For the word *empty*, for example, such expectation is not expressed. In the Full dictionary of synonyms and antonyms there are some more synonyms that were not mentioned before: unencumbered, unobstructed, unfrequented, weak, silly,

idle (Devlin, 2002). The dictionary does give any explanations.

Dictionaries give the following antonyms for the word *empty*: *unencumbered, unobstructed, unfrequented, weak, silly, idle, full, filled, replete, occupied, tenanted, inhabited, complete, entire, adequate, sufficient, sated, satisfied, copious, abundant, wise, thoughtful, brainy, farseeing, smart, erudite, sensible, scholarly, informed, forcible, important* (Devlin, 2002; Fallows, 1898). There are not examples of using for any of these words, no contexts nor specifications of the meanings. However, if we take this list of antonyms as it is, we get additional meanings for the adjective *empty*, not checked in the lexicographic sources, such as ‘short-sighted’ ‘stupid’, ‘not satisfactory’, ‘inattentive’ ‘unconvincing’, etc.,. If so, the English adjective *empty* must have senses that are not typical for the Russian analogue such as ‘poor’, ‘not informed’, ‘inconclusive’. On the basis of dictionaries, one can conclude that Russian and English word-building classes are close in meaning and both show a similar semantics evolution, developing, in addition to the main, the semantic lines associated with peripheral semes as ‘hunger’, ‘freedom’, ‘insufficient’, ‘lack of meaning’ and others, although the distribution of the parts of speech in these two languages varies considerably.

#### 4. Conclusion

On the basis of the analysis, the following conclusions can be made.

1. In English, the closest equivalent for the Russian *nycmoi* is the adjective *empty*. In both languages, synonymic adjectives are connected with two main semantic lines: a line, developing a nominative spatial meaning and a line developing a figurative estimating one. These two adjectives are the tops of big world -building classes in their languages, but in English, it is less extensive than in Russian. A big number of words derivate from *empty* that in Russian goes back to the same root *nycm-*, in English have different roots. On the basis of dictionaries, one can conclude that Russian and English word-building classes are close in meaning and both show a similar semantics evolution, developing, in addition to the main, the semantic lines associated with peripheral semes as ‘hunger’, ‘freedom’, ‘insufficient’, ‘lack of meaning’ and others, although the distribution of the parts of speech in the two languages varies considerably.
2. The main synonyms for the English *empty* are the words *unoccupied, void, vacant, vacuous, sometimes spare, free, and clear*. Almost all of these words are quite close in meaning and often are definitions for each other. Differences in the semantics are related mainly to the sphere of consumption and estimating. The adjective *empty* has the widest meaning. It can be combined with various nouns, abstract or concrete, designing space, vessels, facilities, and, on the other hand, can be applied to a person and his thoughts or emotions. The word *empty* can reflect almost all aspects of emptiness. This whole group of synonyms has also both literal and figurative meanings. For many words of this group, including the adjective *empty* itself, negative estimation is peculiar. Other synonyms are not so frequent and their particularities are not explained in details in dictionaries.
3. Perception of emptiness is subjective: people often call *empty* not a space or a vessel, where there are not any contents but where there are no expected or useful ones.
4. The adjective *empty* has, according to dictionaries, a large number of antonyms, such as *full, filled, replete, occupied, tenanted, inhabited* and others. The semantic of antonyms allows to suppose, that the word *empty* has additional meanings as ‘stupid’, ‘not satisfactory’ and some others.
5. Consideration of dialect material does not give essentially new data on semantic structure of the word.

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